

Comments submitted to the House Committee on
International Relations and Economic Development
8.31.2020

Interim Charge 2: Study Texas' current and future workforce pipeline structure, with a focus on input from the state's largest industries and middle skill employers. Examine what skill gaps exist within our state; identify methods of improving regional coordination and alignment between industry, the public workforce system, public schools, higher education institutions, and community-based organizations to create college and career pathways; and provide recommendations to overcome barriers in the workforce pipeline and to enhance career path options.

Respectfully submitted:

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TXPOST's Mission: We convene, educate and advocate to strengthen the quality and availability of afterschool and summer programs for Texas kids.

OVERVIEW

Today, the private sector spends more than \$164 billion annually on employee education and training to close workforce skill gaps.ⁱ At the same time, more than 1 in 3 workers agree that they do not have the education and training they need to get ahead.ⁱⁱ Such gaps, so readily identified by both sides of the workforce preparedness equation, highlight the need for innovative solutions to ensure we are adequately preparing our young people to enter the future workforce prepared for a constantly changing 21st century economy.

Out of School Time (OST) programs are helping to close the gaps that exist between the skills and competencies students possess and the needs of employers—which range from communication and problem-solving skills to proficient technical skills. OST programs are also connecting students to the workforce in other ways, helping them discover new interests and professions they may never have been exposed to and providing real-world work opportunities to help them develop their own skills and reach their career aspirations.

THE PROBLEM

Data spanning more than a decade indicate that there are sets of foundational skills and competencies that are strongly desired among employers but challenging to find among potential employees. The ability to work in teams, solve problems, and communicate effectively are among the principal skills—included under various terminologies, such as “social and emotional learning,”ⁱⁱⁱ “employability skills,”^{iv} and “foundations for young adult success,”^v—that employers consistently report desiring in their future hires. In fact, in a 2020 National Association of Colleges and Employers *Job Outlook* survey, more than 91% of employers report that they look for employees with problem solving skills, more than 86% are looking for candidates who possess the ability to work in a team, and approximately 7 in 10 employers look for communication skills.^{vi}

Despite the high priority regularly placed on these skills, employers have long reported that these are skills difficult to find in potential and current employees. A 2017 Business Roundtable survey of its member companies found that although critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills were highly relevant to positions within their company, these were also the skills that were challenging to find in qualified job candidates.^{vii}

In addition to the foundational skills integral to success in the workplace, there are technical skills that are increasingly necessary in today’s rapidly evolving economy. For example, the U.S.’s STEM jobs will grow 13 percent between 2017 and 2027, compared to 9 percent of other jobs overall.^{viii} However, employers report immense difficulties recruiting qualified applicants. It is also important to note that the technical skills gap extends further than STEM-specific skills. Although more than half of the current U.S. labor market was comprised of middle-skills jobs in 2015 with projections that that number would remain relatively constant, only 43 percent of workers are trained for these jobs.^{ix}

A third important category that factors into the hiring equation is one’s experience and familiarity with a position’s responsibilities. Despite the weight placed on job experience, a candidate’s lack of experience was one of the top reasons employers find it hard to fill positions, and among unemployed adults looking for work, a lack of job experience was a primary obstacle to finding a job. Without opportunities for real

work experience and exposure to the numerous fields and positions that exist in today's job market, Texas youth will be unprepared to make informed decisions about their futures and employers will remain challenged by growing skills gaps in their own pipelines.

IMPROVED COORDINATION AND ALIGNMENT

The state must support innovative partnerships and cross-sector efforts to fully leverage community resources to meet their workforce needs, especially on the local and regional level. Broad collaborative coalitions that include diverse stakeholders, like workforce boards, businesses, community based providers, youth serving organizations, educational entities, parents, and students, can enhance seamless rather than segmented service provision, especially as it relates to career exploration, career pathways, and hands-on, work-based learning experiences for all Texas youth.

Including OST programs in local efforts around specific, district initiatives—like Career and Technical Education (CTE), for example—models key partnerships that can be replicated by other districts around the state in pursuit of shared youth development goals. Collaboration and creative braiding of funds for comprehensive programs will foster improved communication and more coordinated efforts to close skills gaps, rather than continuing to approach that work in silos.

Identifying places where students lack quality career learning opportunities in school and out of school during local district needs assessment processes will help to target investment in fiscal and human resources to address specifically identified community needs. And coordinating from elementary school through secondary education with age-appropriate resources and community engagement will foster continuity within and across efforts to address the current gaps in skills development.

OUT OF SCHOOL TIME IS A PARTNER

For students in elementary through high school, more than 80 percent of their time is spent learning outside of school—at afterschool and summer programs, in libraries, in museums, in science centers, at home, or in the community. Fewer than 20 percent of their 16 waking hours are spent in school.^x

To address the nation's skills gap and prepare our emerging workforce for the changing economy, young people need access to expanded learning opportunities made possible by afterschool and summer learning programs. These programs are critical partners for CTE, Career Pathway, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs, and so much more. Out of School Time programs help young people develop skills that employers need in engaging, relevant environments.

OST provides a flexible learning environment and has a proven track record for combining enrichment, academics, and real-world experiences to serve more than 10 million young people in all 50 states. OST programs have expertise leveraging resources from multiple community partners, including businesses, parents, libraries, schools, museums, and health centers.

COVID RESPONSE & AN INTENTIONAL FOCUS ON EQUITY

These many gaps in our workforce pipeline and the disparities and inequities our youth and communities face more broadly are only being exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. OST programs have long been key to students' success and will be even more so in the months ahead when students face an uphill climb to catch up and keep up. At the beginning of the shutdown in the U.S., polls showed both kids and parents

were worried about learning loss. In an April 2020 poll by Save the Children, 52% of children were worried that they would not learn enough to be ready for school in the fall, while 51% reported spending only 2-3 hours per day on schoolwork. Among parents, 66% wanted to ensure their child did not fall behind in school.^{xi} Moreover, the challenges our young people face extend far beyond needing to make up academic ground as they return to school, both virtually and in person, this fall.

Out of School Time programs can help youth reconnect and re-engage after this period of loss and isolation. The OST field has long focused on the whole child, and OST staff are trained professionals who stand ready to provide the necessary supports kids need to emerge from this crisis strong, resilient, and hopeful, and programs are uniquely positioned to help kids learn and grow. That includes helping them manage stressful, traumatic experiences.

Before the pandemic, OST programs were a lifeline for underserved communities; now they are more crucial than ever. The gaps in opportunity that already disadvantage students from low-income families are likely to grow, with many more families struggling from job losses and fallout from the pandemic. The importance of afterschool and summer programs is especially pronounced in low-income communities and communities of color, where, historically, participation in and demand for OST programs have been much higher than in higher income communities.^{xii}

Programs provide underserved youth with snacks and meals, expanded learning, and skills to thrive in school and life, and they have continued to do so during the pandemic. Many programs partner with schools, churches, and other local organizations to offer services for free, including daily snacks and dinners, and connect families with health care, employment, and other resources.

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